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## In the Age of New Technologies – Repurposing Intangible Heritage

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Thank you for inviting me to this year’s forum on a topic that is particularly relevant in a post-pandemic context. I would like to share some thoughts and experiences of digital intangible heritage as an experimental, interdisciplinary field of community-based research and action.

Discussions about intangible heritage are often characterised by what could be described as ‘anxiety of safeguarding’ in order to avert its loss. Indeed, heritage scholars De Silvey and Harrison have noted that ‘... the perception of risk and endangerment is fundamental in the production of heritage value and a motivating factor in heritage practice’ (2020). ‘Safeguarding anxiety’ has also been discussed by prof. Hafstein who argues that ‘intangible heritage appears forever to be on the verge of destruction’ (2018). Oft-cited threats include social and biophysical factors, such as globalisation, social transformation, war, climate change and, more recently, the covid-19 pandemic. ‘Safeguarding anxiety’ and the actions of governments and cultural institutions in recognising cultural traditions as intangible heritage have come under scrutiny by many researchers highlighting authoritarian, nationalistic and neoliberal entanglements.

The compilation of national and international inventories and lists through different documentation programmes in order to make records for future generations could be regarded as a key manifestation of ‘safeguarding anxiety’. Yet, any process of recording and documentation creates a static representation, a moment that captures and freezes in time people and social and cultural practices. It also situates those knowledges and practices firmly in the past. While I am a fervent supporter of cultural documentation (especially when carried out in inclusive and participatory ways), I believe that the process of defining knowledges and practices as intangible heritage should not be driven primarily by the fear of loss, but by engaging with the present and looking towards the future.

In my earlier work, I theorised intangible heritage in terms of ‘the politics of erasure’ arguing that impermanence, change and transformation are important heritage values. These ideas are well-encapsulated in the quote attributed to Heraclitus ‘panta rhei, ouden menei’ (πάντα ρει και ουδέν μένει) and can also be found in Bhuddhist philosophy and the Japanese concept of mujo. Applying such a theoretical framework of impermanence to intangible heritage would suggest a ‘life-cycle approach’. According to this viewpoint, like everything living, living heritage too could follow a course of birth, growth, change, decline, death, or rebirth or reincarnation. Rather than ‘stasis’, intangible heritage is ‘in flux’, always ‘becoming’.

It is within this framework of ‘becoming’ that I will be looking at intangible heritage and not as static, endangered knowledges and practices. Indeed, the forum’s subject of ‘convergence and creativity’ invites us to rethink intangible heritage from the prism of change and transformation rather than the

prism of ‘safeguarding anxiety’. The rest of the talk will look at how different new and digital technologies can create new types of engagements with intangible heritage, supporting artistic and scientific experimentation and community action.

### **i-Treasures**

Firstly, I will discuss the i-Treasures project which was an EU-funded collaborative research partnership between thirteen European universities, research institutes and small/ medium technology business that took place between 2013-2017. The aim of the project was to create an open and extendable online platform, including a Virtual Learning Environment aimed at facilitating learning on a cognitive but also embodied/motor level. At the heart of the project was a double technological challenge: on the one hand, the use of new technology tools and sensors in order to capture various aspects of intangible heritage expressions, such as body movement, vocal production and facial recognition (Pozzi et al. 2015); on the other hand, the semantic analysis of these data so that they are then made available in a multimodal way through the platform. The platform consisted of five separate but interconnected technological functionalities which were the product of the research specialization of partner institutions: 1) the Digital Repository, 2) Learning Management System (LMS) courses, 3) the Pedagogical Planner, 4) 3D Sensorimotor Learning Games and 5) Text-to-Song Synthesis.

From the outset of the project, the research team was required to incorporate the use of technological sensors which were able to capture specific aspects of human activity. This meant that only specific types of cultural

expressions could be examined in the fields of dance, traditional crafts and singing practices.

A key challenge for the entire project was how to make the platform accessible to a wide range of users. In order to facilitate public engagement, access to the platform became open and efforts were made to create strong relations with heritage practitioners, educators and researchers through a series of public events, lectures, training workshops and demonstrations in the different local research settings and virtually.

However, decisions as to what exactly should be recorded and transmitted through the available sensors put in place a selection process whereby cultural practices became the subject of intensive high-tech data collection and documentation. Often this happened through the use of invasive tools, like the custom-made hyper-helmet for the documentation of the movement of the larynx during polyphonic performances or body sensors for the recording of movement. Data collected through this process were used to create 3D Sensorimotor learning games. The games were primarily but not exclusively addressed to a younger generation, which is typically thought to be tech-savvy and familiar with virtual gaming. While carrying out the project, the consortium debated at length concerns about gamification, including the trivialisation, commercialisation and decontextualization of cultural knowledges and practices (Alivizatou 2021). Yet, project evaluation with groups of teachers and pupils revealed positive attitudes towards the games as resources supporting learning and allowing tech-savvy youth to engage creatively with intangible heritage. Moreover, feedback from heritage practitioners revealed a sense of pride that local traditional practices became the subject of scientific and technological research funded by the EU.

It is now 4 years since the end of the project and my scepticism about decontextualization has waned. What I have come to value out of this digital platform was the co-creation of a scientific experiment bringing together an international interdisciplinary group of researchers, small technology start-ups, cultural practitioners, local and virtual communities of school teachers and students to engage creatively and repurpose intangible heritage with respect and inquisitiveness. After all, the project is now finished and all the dances and singing traditions that were the subject of the learning resources continue their own life-cycle, regardless of our experiments.

### **Art Pluriverse**

A second project I would like to discuss more briefly is the Art Pluriverse, a community science series on intangible heritage, art and open knowledge and its aim to inspire people to experience tradition anew. Based on principles of creative commons and deep respect for communities of cultural practitioners, the project brought together in an online open forum at the height of the covid-19 pandemic, groups of contemporary artists, researchers and local textile communities to enable knowledge exchange, cross-fertilisation of ideas and creativity. The artist-communities synergies led to the co-creation of new artworks, often with powerful social messages, as was the case of the collaboration between the artist Maria Byck and the Roma community of Aliveri which explored the power of clothing to reflect personal identity and collective struggles. Or the partnership between digital artist Konstantinos Garametsis and the Rizarios School of traditional weaving which led to the co-creation of new textiles pieces that combine traditional techniques and patterns with new media and digital tools.

In my view, this project stands out for its efforts to create a new space for artistic experimentation and intercultural dialogue and as such giving new meaning and value to intangible heritage.

## **Palestine Open Maps**

The final project I would like to discuss is Palestine Open Maps, an online platform that combines new technologies for mapping and storytelling and was co-created by researchers, civil society groups and journalists in order to bring to life absent and hidden geographies and stories from historic Palestine. Map sheets drawn by the British Palestine Exploration Fund in 1940s were digitised, seamlessly joined up and further combined with other data sources such as oral histories, village statistics and historic photography. The project has given new meaning to a collection of colonial maps in a process of decolonising mapping and relocating community histories. Here, new technologies have repurposed intangible heritage to serve community action work.

## **Conclusion**

To summarise, these three projects underline different ways in which new technologies can reanimate and give new meaning to knowledges and practices from the past in the present. Against this backdrop, perhaps now is the time to overcome safeguarding anxiety and repurpose intangible heritage in the era of convergence and creativity inviting scientific and artistic experimentation, ethically-informed collaboration and activism. It is not surprising that all three projects discussed are open-access and free to reuse, something that invites us to reexamine debates about cultural ownership and creative commons.

## References

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Alivizatou, M. 2021. Digital Intangible Heritage: Inventories, Virtual learning and participation, in *Heritage & Society* 12(2-3): 116-35

De Silvey, C. and R. Harrison. 2020. Anticipating Loss: Rethinking Endangerment in Heritage Futures, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26(1): 1-7

Hafstein, V. 2018. *Making Intangible Heritage: El Condor Pasa and Other Stories from UNESCO*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press

Pozzi, F, M Alivizatou, F Dagnino, M Ott, 2015. 'Going Beyond Preservation: How to Support Technology-Enhanced Learning in ICH Education', *International Journal of Heritage in the Digital Era* 4(1): 21-40.

## Links

Art Pluriverse: <https://bowb.org/art-pluriverse-news/art-pluriverse-2020-all-links-to-the-textile-month-programme>

Palestine Open Maps: <https://palopenmaps.org/>